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AUTHOR Hill, Robert F.
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ABSTRACT

Social honor--or status--in the school and larger community, and selected aspects of traditional Polish-culture maintenance, are important factors relating to Polish-American ethnicity in the school. This is demonstrated using data collected by questionnaire and participant observation in an urban Roman Catholic secondary school in the American North-East, where the students are predominantly Polish-American origin. Like culture in the broader, more definitive sense, a school has a history and, thus, certain historically derived values, expectations, and a place in its community setting. These tend to greatly influence not only the school's relation to its students but also its relation to parents and the community as a whole. Thus, the staff, of predominantly German and Irish background, tends to stereotype students according to perceived ethnic origin despite high ethnic heterogeneity. Student apathy is explained by theories of "broken homes" or "Polishness." Choice of school program for girls is highly predictable along ethnic lines. The value of higher education for girls is negatively reinforced in the Polish-American family, providing functional congruity with the school. (Author/JM)

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ETHNIC STATUS, CULTURE AND COMMUNITY: The Polish-American Underclass in the Roman Catholic School System

by

Robert F. Hill* **

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**graduate student, Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh; Maurice Falk Predoctoral Fellow in Ethnicity, Racism and Mental Health; Instructor in Anthropology, Point Park College and Duquesne University

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ETHNIC STATUS, CULTURE AND COMMUNITY: THE POLISH-AMERICAN UNDER-CLASS IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will discuss data collected by questionnaire and participant observation in an urban Roman Catholic secondary school in the American North-East, where the students are predominantly of Polish-American ethnic origin.[1] I will focus on certain aspects of the meaning and function of ethnicity in this school and then attempt to anchor these in the broader and deeper contexts of community and family life where I have been doing field work for the past three years.

I assume, along with Burnett (1970:4) that "...the culture of any institution (such as a school) is an incomplete set of patterns -- too limited to serve as a system of guides and of functions for the full round of life..." But like culture in the broader, more definitive sense, a school has a history, and thus certain historically derived values, expectations, and a place in its community setting. These tend to greatly influence not only the school's relation to its students, but also its relation to parents and the community as a whole (Wax, 1971:2).

Moreover, I agree with von Mering (1971), Zborowski (1970), Stein (1971), et. al.[2] -- to the exclusion of most other writers on the

ethnic condition[3] -- that there is an unconscious dimension to the observable behavior patterns of members of any ethnic group. These are derived essentially from two factors: (1) the status situation as defined by Weber (1958:187) whereby, "...every typical component of the life fate of men...is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor..." giving rise at the social level (along with life style considerations) to an ethnic status stratification system, and at the individual level, to certain ethnic status personality features (Honnigman, 1967:139); and (2) the cultural factor whereby every individual through an accident of birth is to some significant degree shaped psychologically by patterns of socialization and individuation which have been passed down from generation to generation resulting in a personality ideal against which everyone in the group is measured. As Spiro (1955:1248) cogently expresses it "...external acculturation is not a reliable index of personality change... (Thus)...cultural changes occur without corresponding changes in personality."

In this paper I intend to show that social honor (status) in the school and larger community, and selected aspects of traditional Polish-culture maintenance are important factors relating to Polish-American ethnicity in the school.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Demographically, the community served by the school under consideration is quite representative of many other so-called "white working-class ethnic" communities.[4] In 1960, the two city wards which are my focus, and which supply about 80% of the school student body, numbered a total population of just over 25,000 people. Although preliminary figures from its 1970 census indicate a recent population loss, the position of the community relative to other areas, and its basic socio-cultural character have probably changed very little.[5] Table 1 shows the 1960 census figures for median income (just over $5,000) and median school years completed (just under 9) compared to Black and Jewish areas nearby. Due to the inflation over the last 10 years all the figures for income would be considerably higher today. The relative positions of these wards is the important fact, however.

TABLE 1

Median Family Income and School Years Completed
by Ethnic Wards 1960

Ward	Numerically Dominant Group	Median Family Income	Median School Years Completed
6--study	Polish	$ 5,184	8.8
9--community	Polish	5,473	8.9
14	Jewish	10,240	13.3
3	Black	3,132	8.1
city as a whole	------	5,605	10.0

Five other categories: (1) percent of owner occupation, (2) percent native white (3) percent foreign born, (4) percent non-white and (5) country of origin of predominate foreign born population, give further credence to the stable white working class ethnic character of the study community. These are shown in Table 2 below with the same other wards for comparison.

TABLE 2

Selected Community Characteristics by Ethnic Wards - 1960

Ward	% owner occupied	% native white	% foreign born	% non-white	country of origin of Predominant foreign born population
6--study	40	76	7	17	Poland
9--community	51	89	10	1	Poland
14	55	86	13	1	Russia
3	16	5	3	92	Italy
city as a whole	49	76	7	17	Italy

Secondly, as shown in Table number 3 below, the study community is a "whole" community involving "...a full table of organization and continuity in depth uniting the lives of the people of the table repeating or reiterating in the main, their experience from generation to generation..." (Arensburg and Kimball 1965:23). In other words, it

includes a representative number of all ages and both sexes -- for our purposes, making the large Polish-American contingent a unit culture (Burnett, 1970:4) -- and distinguishing it qualitatively from an ethnic neighborhood (Liebow, 1965, Gans, 1965, Hannerz, 1968) or the suburban areas, Scott and Monroeville, shown below for comparative purposes. This has considerable significance for culture maintenance, and will be discussed further below.[6]

TABLE 3

Percent of Population By Age Groups and Ethnic Wards - 1960

Ward	Under 5	5-14	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 and Over
6 (Polish)	9	18	13	11	15	15	9	10
9 (Polish)	9	16	15	11	14	14	10	11
14 (Jewish)	7	15	15	10	13	15	13	12
3 (Black)	10	16	11	11	15	14	13	10
city as a whole	9	17	13	12	14	13	11	11
Scott Township	14	19	8	15	16	10	6	12
Monroeville	17	22	9	19	16	8	5	4

Finally, for some human ecology and historical perspective, the socio-cultural succession pattern in this community is as follows: (1) American Indians until the 18th century, (2) French Catholic military

forces giving way to British military forces and setting the stage for plantation oriented WASPS in the mid 18th century, (3) German Protestant craftsmen and merchants at the turn of the 19th century associated with the place which was geographically strategic during the War of 1812, (4) Irish and German Catholics associated with the beginnings of industrialization during the first half of the 19th century (the end of the so-called "old" immigration), and (5) The East and South European "new" immigrant Catholic groups during the peak of industrialization in the late 1800's and early 1900's (Borkowski, 1971). While a Black population is recently assuming a greater prominance in the community, their powerlessness is only slightly greater than that of the Poles. For example, most businesses are still owned or managed by "old" immigrant stock. This is further evidenced by their predominance in the local commercial trade organization. The same is true of the political sphere -- where both ward chairmen are of Irish descent. And it is also the case for secondary education -- where the only easily accessible (Catholic) high school carries a long history and heavy flavor of pride oriented "Germanness".[7]

For a brief but recent sample of the "old" immigrant status denigration of the "new" at the community level, consider this excerpt from a local Roman Catholic church bulletin where the congregation is predominantly Slavic. It reads:

"Situation Ethnics Father Andrew Greeley, University of Chicago, sociologist, says that 'ethnicity' -- what ethnic group you come from -- is important after all. For example, he says, research shows that of all Catholic immigrant groups the Irish are (a) most successful in terms of education, occupation and income; (b) tied (with the French, of course) for happiest; (c) tied (with Germans) for least extreme religiously and least racist; and (d) least anti-Semitic. The French and Italians, he says, are substantially less devout than the other groups. And the poor Poles are (a) least successful in terms of education, occupation and income; (b) most loyal to the Democratic party; (c) tied (with the French) for highest in religious extremism and anti-Semitism; and (d) highest in racism. Any one of these would be enought to account for his final finding. The Poles are also the least happy of all Catholic immigrant groups. Though that may be just because of all those rotten Polish jokes." (My emphasis).

Ethnicity in the School

Contrary to one of the assumptions which lies behind much ethnic stereotyping -- that one is either this or that -- the evidence from the Roman Catholic school based on responses to a questionnaire, indicates that almost three-fourths of the students are of "mixed" nationality background. This is of course different from being "melted." But of those students whose parents are both of the same background, 80 percent are Polish. These figures are shown below in tables 4 and 5. The question then becomes: with so much ethnic mixing, how can ethnicity be a factor -- except for those few students who have a relatively homogeneous background?

TABLE 4

Students Whose Father and Mother
Are of the Same Background

Nationality	Number of Students
Polish	28
German	3
Irish	2
Croatian	1
Afro-American	1

TABLE 5

Students Whose Father and Mother
Are of Different Backgrounds

Nationality	No. of Students
Polish-German	9
Polish-Irish	6
Polish-Croatian	5
Polish-Italian	4
Polish-Slovak	3
Polish-English	2
Polish-Lithuanian	2
Polish-Syrian	1
German-Irish	11
German-Italian	3
German-English	1
German-Austrian	1
German-Scotch	1
German-Ukranian	1
German-Finnish	1
Italian-Irish	1
Italian-Greek	1
Italian-Russian	1
Italian-Croatian	1
Irish-Croatian	1
Irish-French	1
Slovak-Czech	1
Slovak-English	1
Lithuanian-Croatian	1
Spanish-Dutch	1
Polish-German-Irish	3
Polish-German-Italian	2
Polish-German-Croatian	1
Polish-German-Welsh	1
Polish-German-English	1
Polish-German-Swiss	1
Polish-Irish-Lithuanian	1
Polish-Irish-Scotch	1
Polish-Irish-Croatian	1
Polish-Irish-Greek	1
Polish-Irish-Russian	1
German-Irish-English	2
German-Irish-French	1
German-Italian-Syrian	1
Irish-Italian-Slovak	1
Irish-Afro-Am.-Amer. Ind.	1
Italian-Spanish-Mexican	1
Austrian-Hungarian-Jewish	1
Polish-Lith.-Germ.-Welsh	1

When faced with ambiguity, the logical and most common response is to create a perceptual rule-guide. At this high school, the rule says, "Most students are not interested in learning because they come from broken homes and they are Polish."

During the two months of my observation in the school, the "broken homes" part of the rule guide was offered over and over without any priming on my part. It was said to account for the considerable problems with discipline, attendance, and general interest.

At its worst, however, the utter contempt in which students at this school are held by some of the faculty is exemplified by a remark overheard in the teachers lounge by my colleague, Howard Stein. His notation reads as follows:

> May 5, 1971. Early morning discussion at table between half a dozen male teachers. One teacher (looks German or WASP) said: "Yesterday was the last day for my senior class. I told them - as far as I'm concerned, I'm not giving any hearts and flowers. Good riddance! ...They're the biggest conglomeration of trash in the world. A bunch of nuisances. ...big babies."[8]

Another overheard remark illustrates the other part of the rule. It was uttered in the teachers lounge during a discussion of the intellectual inadequacies of one particular student. One of the several teachers in attendance remarked loudly, "Well, what do you expect? It's the Polish in him." It was not meant to be humorous and apparently there was little concern for the fact that a few of the teachers there also happened to be of Polish descent.

Thus the problem of an ethnic mixture is solved. If a student is said to be half-Irish, a fourth German, and a fourth Polish, the Polish part is quantitatively isolated and blamed for his shortcomings. If he is relatively bright or does well on an assignment its the German or Irish "coming out."

The "self-fulfilling prophecy" or "Rosenthal effect" implications of this situation are clear. And they should be predictable along ethnic lines. One measure of this might be choice of school program.

In choice of school program both the working class factor and the ethnic factor are observable. As shown in Table 6, boys are more likely than girls to choose an academic (college preparation) program, with very little difference according to ethnic grouping. Girls are more likely to choose a "business" (typing, shorthand, etc.) program, and considerably more likely if they are Polish. If both parents are Polish about eighty percent of the girls prepare for a secretary/clerk career. This relationship (between "Polishness" and school program) is significant for girls at the .05 level according to a statistical test.[9]

TABLE 6

Nationality and School Program: By Sex

	Academic		Vocational/Business		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Polish/Polish						
Boys	8	57.1	6	42.9	14	100
Girls	3	21.4	11	78.6	14	100
	11	39.3	17	60.7	28	100
Polish "Mixed"						
Boys	14	56.0	11	44.0	25	100
Girls	9	39.0	14	60.9	23	100
	23	47.9	25	52.1	48	100
"Other"						
Boys	16	59.3	11	40.7	27	100
Girls	8	42.1	11	57.9	19	100
	24	52.2	22	47.8	46	100

Because the above data indicated a positive relationship between "Polishness" and school program (for girls) the decision was made to sharpen this factor by segregating "Polish" students into 3 groups: (1) Those of both a homogeneous and heterogeneous background who had a Polish father, and therefore a Slavic last name; (2) those in the Polish "mixed" category who were at least "half Polish" but not necessarily with a Slavic last name; and (3) our original Polish

"mixed" group. While this is obviously playing with numbers to some extent, the logic behind it was that having a Slavic last name might be translated by both faculty, and the students own perception of himself, into more "Polishness"; thus lowering expectations. As shown below in Table 7, "Polishness" and school program show an almost perfect linear relationship.

TABLE 7

"Polishness" and School Program

	Academic		Vocational/Business		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Polish with Slavic Name	18	36.7	31	63.3	49	100
"Half" Polish	17	44.7	21	55.3	38	100
"Part" Polish	22	45.8	25	54.2	47	100
Others	24	52.2	22	47.8	46	100

It would seem that "old" immigrant denigration of "new" immigrant stock has taken its toll. But its not quite that simple. There is still the family to consider.

The Family Context

Using the same breakdown as before, Tables 8 and 9 below indicate that on the basis of occupation, Polishness is not related to social class in this community. Most fathers and mothers who work have lower class occupations. Yet it is significant that 68 percent of the mothers are housewives. This would seem to be a counter to the charge made in the school: that "all the students come from broken homes." [10]

TABLE 8

Ethnic Background and Father's Occupation

	Deceased, Disabled or Retired		Lower Class Occupation		Middle Class Occupation		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Polish/Polish	5	17.9	19	67.9	4	14.3	28	100
Polish Mixed	12	25.0	29	60.4	7	14.6	48	100
Other	10	21.7	31	67.4	5	10.9	46	100
All	27	22.1	79	64.8	16	13.1	122	100

TABLE 9

Ethnic Background and Mother's Occupation

	Deceased, Disabled or Retired		Lower Class Occupation		Middle Class Occupation		Housewife		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Polish/Polish	2	7.1	7	25.0	1	3.6	18	64.3	28	100
Polish "Mixed"	1	2.1	13	27.1	2	4.2	32	66.6	48	100
Other	1	2.2	10	21.7	2	4.3	33	71.7	46	100
All	4	3.3	30	24.6	5	4.1	83	68.0	122	100

Another important measure of family context is the extensiveness of the family network. In this case, as Table 10 shows, those students with a Polish background are more likely than the "other" groups to have relatives (other than the immediate family) who live in the household or nearby, and who are seen frequently.

TABLE 10

Ethnic Background and Family Extensions

	Yes: Do Have Relatives Close By		No: Do Not Have Relatives Close By		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Polish/Polish	25	89.3	3	10.7	28	100
Polish Mixed	40	83.3	8	16.7	48	100
Other	29	63.0	17	37.0	46	100
All	94	77.0	28	23.0	122	100

One of the most commonly used indices of traditional culture maintenance is language retention (Fishman, 1966). As shown in Table 11 below, almost all those students of homogenous Polish background report foreign language speaking in the home. The speaking is almost always between mother and father or an aged relative, however. Only 1 student out of 122 reported speaking Polish himself -- yet most reportedly can understand quite a lot of it.

TABLE 11

Ethnic Background And Foreign Language Speaking in the Home

	Polish Language Speaking		Other Foreign Language Speaking		None		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Polish/Polish	26	92.3	--	--	2	7.1	28	100
Polish Mixed	21	43.8	1(Ital.)	2.1	26	54.2	48	100
Other	1	2.2	8(Ger.& Slovak)	17.4	37	80.4	46	100
All	48	39.3	9	7.4	65	53.3	122	100

While these last two indicators: family network, and foreign language retention, show a distinct positive relationship to "Polishness", the most telling evidence, for this writer at least, is the negative value placed on education in the Polish-American family. While the typical Polish mother is likely to encourage her son to go as far as possible with his education, the boy is likely to get other signals from his father -- who very likely will encourage him to follow in his own footsteps in a skilled or semi-skilled trade.

With a daughter there is little parental difference of opinion. No matter how intelligent, or how many academic honors a girl may receive, there will be scant encouragement for her to do anything other than get a job or get married. Moreover, if she chooses to go to work,

she should turn all her earnings over to her father and mother in payment for past debts and current subsistance. Under no circumstances should a son or daughter leave the family home except to get married. To do so would be viewed by the parents as betrayal and rejection. Even with an education, there is little of the "my son, the doctor" or "my son, the lawyer" kind of pridefulness -- so common among Jews -- unless the son stays to practice in the ethnic enclave.

Thus, while submission to parental authority and socialization for group dependence have considerable congruence with Post-peasant expectations, traditional Roman Catholicism, and a working class orientation; it would appear that Polish-Americans are just more susceptible to these forces than other groups in the community under consideration. Besides contributing to the maintenance of the ethnic enclave, and traditional Polish culture, these family forces also have their effect on the life choices and chances of Polish-American students in the parochial secondary school.

Summary and Discussion

The purpose of the data presented above has been to suggest that the meaning of ethnicity in the school is surely in part determined by its meaning in the home and in the community at large. In the school, students, particularly those of Polish descent, are labeled

with a negative stereotype and are encouraged to follow a vocational rather than an academic career -- with little regard or sensitivity to individual interests and potentialities. Yet putting the problem into a larger context is helpful for explanation.

One of my informants, for example -- a young girl of Polish descent and a senior in the above discussed parochial school at the time -- told me of her concern over a past meeting with her school counselor. He had advised her to become a nurse rather than follow her previous commitment to art education. And while his advice was probably well meaning (and reality grounded from his perspective) it took no account of her very high, college board exams, or her considerable if tentative, interest in art.

In her home, the girl's interests and talent potential received a similar evaluation. Art was something one should do for fun or for the gifting of family and friends. It was certainly not the work equivilent of cooking, cleaning or a job in a factory -- tasks which women in her family had followed for two generations, since their migration from Europe.

Another Polish-American informant, also highly intelligent (and coincidentally with talent and a degree in art education -- though now in her late 20's and very much married to husband, home, and children) recalled how she was transformed, as a young girl, from a

"dumb hunky" at one school, to a "scandinavian whiz" at another. Just before a geographic move from one town to another, her social mobility conscious parents had gone to court and exchanged their "ski" ending name for something more presentable -- perhaps under particular pressure from her mother who was not Polish.

According to this informant, the psychological transformation was pervasive and large. Yet she now seems relatively content to restrict her artistic talents to the interests of motherhood, family, and friends. She transcended the negative stereotype imposed by the school -- and she now seems very middle class and very WASP. Yet at this point in the life-cycle -- her life situation seems little different in many ways than it would have been had the name change and school transformation never taken place. Surely, both ethnic status and culture have been important in shaping her world -- as they are for everyone.

Through examples such as these we see that not only are school, home and community all important parts of a system which defines, determines, and delimits the particular adaptation of individuals within it; they are also an important framework for looking at situational and cultural factors (Valentine, 1968), as they interact with one another over time. Through their elucidation we may arrive at a better understanding of socio-cultural process -- and thus a better plan for constructive change.

NOTES

[1] The data presented in this paper was collected with the support of the Maurice Falk program in Racism and Mental Health at the University of Pittsburgh. My appreciation extends to Sister Mary Dennis Donovan, and Mr. John Hannigan of the Pittsburgh Roman Catholic Diocese and also to Messers John R. Szala, a former teacher at the school, and Joseph a Borkowski, a local historian, who were all very helpful to my efforts.

[2] See especially Barrabee and von Mering (1953), Opler and Singer (1956), Sauna (1963) and Suchman (1964).

[3] See for example, Barth (1969), Wagley and Harris (1964).

[4] According to 1960 census data there were 10 metropolitan areas (SMSAs) of over 1 million population in the North East and North Central Regions of the United States which had a "Foreign Stock" population (foreign born plus children of foreign born or mixed) making up at least 25% of the total population. In this region the majority of "Foreign Stock" is from Eastern and Southern Europe -- primarily Poles and Italians.

[5] While the population has declined, the end result is merely fewer people per dwelling unit. And although prices for homes are modest, there are very few homes for sale.

[6] As Burnett (1970:4) has correctly pointed out schools or ethnic neighborhoods are not unit cultures because they are not capable of independent operation. On the other hand ethnic communities do have some autonomy "...should the national superstructure or even the immediate urban superstructure, disappear, such a community with a few adjustments could carry on as an independent structural and cultural unit." (Ibid.) This is very likely one of the critical factors in determining differential acculturation/assimilation for various ethnic groups.

[7] When this parish school first opened in the mid 1800s, and for some years after that, all subjects were taught in German. The first teacher reportedly spoke not one word of English. And the order of nuns which is still predominant in the school are overwhelmingly of German descent. One may still hear utterances among them in German, either in the halls or the teachers lounge.

[8] Although my colleague did not recognize the teacher who made this remark, after receiving a description of him, I am sure he is the one teacher in the social science department who was in strong opposition to the ethnic studies pilot program which we, under the direction of the Roman Catholic Diocese, brought into the school.

[9] While almost half of the students are in a college preparatory program, only about 25% actually go on to a four year college. Thus, aspirations are much higher than realization.

[10] An occupation was assigned impressionistically on the basis of the education and/or responsibility involved. Unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled occupations where work with one's hands rather than his brains were assigned to the lower class. Professional, managerial, ownership of a business, or a responsible position in a line hierarchy (such as a mill foreman or police sergeant) received a middle class assignment.

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